



Global Trade Holds its Ground

New data shows global trade reached record levels in 2025 as regional and sector shifts reshaped international flows.

With today's news headlines dominated by trade wars, sanctions and rising protectionism, it's easy to believe that globalization is unravelling. But is that really the case? Not quite, says the [World Economic Forum \(WEF\)](#). In fact, the opposite is true. According to the [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development \(UNCTAD\)](#), global trade broke records last year as it surged past the \$35 trillion mark, despite all the turmoil and concern over tariffs and trade wars.

That number represents a \$2.2 trillion increase (or a roughly 7% jump) over 2024's global trade volumes. UNCTAD says trade in goods comprises about \$1.5 trillion of that increase and that services expanded by roughly \$750 billion. It points to East Asia and Africa as two regions seeing the strongest level of growth last year:

- East Asia's exports recorded the strongest growth over the past four quarters (9%), with intra-regional trade growing by 10%.

- North America's exports fell by 3% in the third quarter but grew 2% over the previous four quarters. UNCTAD says imports were stronger, rising 6% over the same period.
- Europe continued to grow in the third quarter, though at a slower pace. European exports rose 2% in the third quarter and 6% over the last four quarters, while imports increased by 1% in the third quarter of 2025.
- Intra-regional trade was also strong for South America, with trade within the region rising 3% in the third quarter and 7% over the last four quarters.
- Africa showed solid growth in imports of 10% for the prior four quarters and 3% in the third quarter of 2025.

By industry, manufacturing anchored growth for the year as electronics led gains on sustained AI-related demand, while agriculture expanded on higher trade in cereals, fruits and vegetables and oils. The automotive sector weighed on overall

performance as trade declined across most vehicle categories, with hybrids the only area of growth, UNCTAD reports. Commodities delivered mixed results as iron and steel surged, but lower mineral fuel prices kept broader natural-resource trade subdued.

"A recent analysis of international flows reveals a surprising truth: global trade is shifting, but global connectivity overall has proven to be remarkably resilient," WEF reports. "Global exchange remains near historic highs. The increasing trade in Asia, the Middle East and Africa outweighs the shrinkage of US trade."

China Posts Strong Export Volumes

One country that continues to defy the prevailing narrative around slowing global trade is China. Despite tariffs, trade restrictions and ongoing geopolitical friction, it posted solid export performance in 2025, driven by its scale, manufacturing depth and continued demand from key markets.

In fact, China's annual trade surplus hit a record \$1.2 trillion last year, even as exports to the U.S. dropped by 20%, [CNBC](#) reports. Citing Chinese customs data, it says exports surged 6.6% (in U.S. dollar terms) in December, compared to a year earlier. Imports rose 5.7% in December from a year earlier, topping expectations for a 0.9% growth, which was strongest since September last year when they climbed 7.4%.

"As Chinese exporters have ramped up shipments to non-U.S. markets, the growing trade imbalance has prompted concerns from major trading partners, including the European Union," the publication adds, noting that Chinese officials have pledged to "expand imports and work toward balancing trade."

Can the Momentum Keep Up?

The World Bank recently raised its forecast for China's growth in 2026 to 4.4%, 0.4 percentage point higher than its June projection, anticipating further fiscal stimulus, continued resilience of exports and improved investment sentiment.

In "[China's record trade surplus shows it can thrive without the US, but can it keep its winning streak going?](#)" Simone McCarthy discussed the record trade surplus and the probability of a repeat performance in 2026. "Whether or not that engine can keep going at the speed that it has is uncertain," she writes, "and depends on the extent to which countries continue to throw up trade barriers against Chinese goods."

As for world trade as a whole, UNCTAD is predicting weaker momentum this year. "Slower global growth, rising debt, higher trade costs and continued uncertainty are likely to weigh on trade flows."